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ABSTRACT

The National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988 (NELS:88) is the first nationally representative longitudinal sample of eighth-grade students in public and private schools. Data provide measures of student performance and allow for the examination of attitudes and activities of eighth graders as they pass through the education system. Overall, 53 percent had none of the six commonly used risk factors, while 20 percent had two or more. A majority had high educational aspirations, but many were not planning to enter high school programs that would lead them to realize their goals. More than two-thirds reported positive feelings about school. Nineteen percent overall and 30 percent of Hispanic, Black, and American Indian students were not proficient in basic mathematics skills for everyday tasks. Fourteen percent of all eighth graders and about 30 percent of students who usually speak a language other than English were not able to perform basic reading tasks. About 18 percent of the students had repeated at least 1 grade. Typical students reported spending four times as many hours each week watching television as they spent doing homework. NELS:88 data will be used for many years to analyze important issues in American education. Follow-ups began in 1990 and will continue at 2-year intervals. (SLD)

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Research in Brief

NATIONAL EDUCATION LONGITUDINAL STUDY OF 1988
A PROFILE OF THE AMERICAN EIGHTH GRADER

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Research In Brief

Office of Educational Research and Improvement
Christopher T. Cross, Assistant Secretary

U.S. Department of Education
Lauro F. Cavazos, Secretary

National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988
A Profile of The American Eighth Grader

Why do some children succeed in school while others do not? The answer to this question may become more evident as data collected through the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988 (NELS:88) are analyzed over time.

NELS:88 is the first nationally representative longitudinal sample of eighth grade students in public and private schools. The resultant data provide measures of student performance and allow for the examination of attitudes and activities of eighth graders as they pass through the education system.

The Findings

At-Risk Issues

Early analysis of NELS:88 data examined information on six commonly used indicators of "at risk" status. Overall, 53 percent of the students had none of these risk factors, 27 percent had one, and 20 percent had two or more.

The at-risk indicators and the percentage of eighth graders identified in each category are

- Single parent family—22 percent;
- Family income less than $15,000 — 21 percent;
- Home alone more than 3 hours a day—14 percent;
- Parents have no high school diploma—11 percent;
- Sibling dropped out—10 percent;
- Limited-English proficiency—2 percent.

Students with several risk factors tended to have more educational problems, including lower grades and higher absenteeism, than students with none. Students with two or more risk factors were six times as likely as those with none to report that they did not expect to graduate from high school; they were twice as likely to score in the lowest 25 percent on achievement tests and to receive the lowest 25 percent of grades.

High School and College Plans

Although a majority of the eighth graders had high educational aspirations, many were not planning to enter high school programs that would lead them to realize their goals.

- While two-thirds planned to finish college or attain higher degrees, only about one-third planned to enroll in a college-preparatory program. In fact, 25 percent of the eighth graders did not know which high school program they would enter.
- Hispanics and American Indians were the most likely to report that they did not expect to complete high school.

School Safety and School Climate

More than two-thirds of eighth graders reported positive feelings about school. Some subgroups were more likely than others to report negative experiences.

- Overall, 10 percent of students reported that someone had offered to sell them drugs at school;
- Blacks and American Indians were nearly twice as likely as whites to report that they did not feel safe at school (18 percent versus 9.9 percent).

Math and Reading Performance

Nineteen percent of all eighth graders and 30 percent of Hispanics, blacks, and American Indians were not proficient in the basic math skills considered necessary to perform everyday tasks. Fourteen percent of all eighth graders and about 30 percent of students who usually speak a language other than English were unable to perform basic reading tasks, such as finding information in a text or identifying the author's main thought.

To explore the connection between socioeconomic status (SES) and achievement, several family factors were taken into account—income, educational levels, and occupations of both mother and father.

- Students in the top 25 percent of SES were eight times as likely as those in the bottom 25 percent to be proficient at the advanced mathematics level (conceptual understanding);
- Among low SES students, 18 percent of Asians, but fewer than 8 percent of whites, Hispanics, and blacks performed at the advanced mathematics level.
- Among low SES students, about one-quarter of Asians, Hispanics, and blacks, and 17 percent of whites failed to show basic reading skills.

Grade Retention

Overall, 18 percent of the students reported that they had repeated at least one grade and about 2 percent, two or more. Those most likely to be repeaters are from low SES; male; black, Hispanic, or American Indian; have low grades or limited-English proficiency.

A study to examine the relationship between repeating grades and achievement is in process. It will examine the effects of being held back

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at various grade levels, from kindergarten through eighth grade.

Other Findings

Typical eighth graders reported spending four times more hours per week watching television than doing homework (21.4 hours versus 5.6 hours); they spend about 2 hours of leisure time reading.

Using NELS Data

Researchers for many years to come will be looking at NELS:88 data. In so doing, they may be able to enlighten debate on such things as the value of taking algebra and foreign languages in eighth grade, the extent of the at-risk problem, and the effects of grade retention on later achievement and persistence in school.

Noted sociologist James Coleman has begun to review the data and says they point to a dysfunction between families and schools. He believes the data show that American society has moved into an era with new-age families: 22 percent of the students are from single parent households and only 64 percent live with both their natural mother and father.

One dysfunction between families and schools is the gap between student aspirations and actions. Coleman hypothesizes that students have no one to talk with about their plans. While 26 percent reported never having discussed their educational plans with their fathers and 21 percent not even with their mothers, schools have not picked up the slack. Altogether, 54 percent of eighth graders had never talked about their high school plans with a teacher and 64 percent had never talked to a school guidance counselor. Although decisions made by and for students at this time have far-reaching impact, students often are not provided with adequate advice.

Survey Scope

NELS:88 data can be used to analyze important issues in American education. But answers to difficult questions require more than statistical tabulations, and the real story about NELS is that it will provide the raw material for new research.

NELS:88 is only the beginning of a major study that will reveal more as new data are analyzed. In 1988, NCES surveyed 24,599 eighth grade students in 1,000 schools, their parents, teachers, and principals. During the spring of 1990, NCES revisited the students as 10th graders to see how closely their expectations and aspirations for high school and beyond match the reality of their lives. The next followup will take place when they are 12th graders and, after that, at 2-year intervals.

Future reports using NELS:88 baseline data will include the following topics:

- Eighth grade student test results
- Psychometric analysis of NELS:88 base-year test battery
- Coursework taken by eighth graders
- Math and science teaching in eighth graders' schools
- Quality of responses of eighth grade students to questionnaire items
- NELS:88 base-year parent descriptive report
- Portrait of the at-risk eighth grader

For a copy of *NELS:88, A Profile of the American Eighth Grader*, send $9.00 to: Superintendent of Documents, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, DC 20402–9325. Include stock number: 065–000–00404–6.

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